

A bird survey of the Amarpur area of the Dibru-Saikhowa Biosphere Reserve, Assam, India

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The Amarpur area of the Dibru-Saikhowa Biosphere Reserve in north-east Assam was visited during 17–21 March 1998. A total of 107 species were recorded including five threatened species: Greater Adjutant *Leptoptilos dubius*, Ferruginous Pochard *Aythya nyroca*, Jerdon's Babbler *Chrysomma altiloistre*, Black-breasted Parrotbill *Paradoxornis flavirostris* and Marsh Babbler *Pellorneum palustre*.

INTRODUCTION

The grasslands of north-east India are well known both for their large mammals, such as Indian rhinoceros *Rhinoceros unicornis* and Asian elephant *Elephas maximus*, and for restricted-range birds (Stattersfield *et al.* 1998). Much exploration of these areas was conducted in the early part of the twentieth century but, unfortunately, political problems and the presence of large, dangerous mammals have meant that many areas remain poorly surveyed. The birds of Dibru-Saikhowa Wildlife Sanctuary (DSWS) in north-east Assam have been reported on several times in recent years, most extensively by Choudhury (1994; but see also Choudhury 1995 and 1997, Talukdar *et al.* 1995, Kazmierczak and Allen 1997). The absence of rhinoceros in the sanctuary has made bird surveys easier, but the good coverage has been largely due to the enthusiasm and interest of the Wildlife Range Officer, Mr N. F. Sarmah.

However, the rather remote Amarpur area, on the north side of the Brahmaputra River, which is not included in DSWS, but is part of the wider Dibru-Saikhowa Biosphere Reserve (DSBR), has received very little attention. Mr Sarmah was keen to have an assessment of the avifauna of this region carried out and to receive recommendations for conservation of the area; he provided invaluable help for my short visit during 17–21 March 1998. The Amarpur area is of particular interest as it is known to have significant areas of tall grass, which are largely absent in the other areas of DSWS. Dr Anwaruddin Choudhury of the Rhino Foundation has been the only ornithologist to visit this area in recent times and, during a short visit in December 1993, he reported seeing a single Black-breasted Parrotbill *Paradoxornis flavirostris*, a species for which there are hardly any recent records anywhere in its range. I was interested in seeing which other restricted-range grassland species occurred, since there seem to have been very few recent records of some of these either (Majumdar and Brahmachari 1986, Rahmani 1986, Stattersfield *et al.* 1998).

Since my visit however, Mr Sarmah has been most tragically killed by a rogue elephant he was trying to capture. It is characteristic that he was killed while trying to protect wildlife and to act on behalf of the local community which had been terrorised by this animal. Although his death is a great loss to conservation in

India, I hope that many others in his area will, nevertheless, have been inspired by him to take a deeper interest in its wildlife.

GEOGRAPHY

The Amarpur area lies in north-east Assam at c.27°50'N 95°35'E, forming a peninsula on the north side of the Lohit River, bordered to the east by the Dibang and to the west by the Dotung Rivers. It is a rather remote area, and at the time of my visit there were no telephone or radio communications in the area. A near-daily ferry was running from Kheeraghat on the south bank of the Lohit to Balighat on one of the small islands on the southern tip of Amarpur, carrying local people between the hill villages of Arunachal Pradesh and the main roads and markets of north-east India.

The part of the Amarpur peninsula within the reserve (Sarmah 1996) covers about 30 km². It is generally low-lying and much of it is flooded during the monsoon season. Owing to the force of the river flow at this time, these riverine areas often change their boundaries to some extent. The Dibang was clearly eroding the eastern edge of the area, while the small islands to the south also seemed to be shifting. Such remaking of the terrain presumably contributes to the maintenance of the grassland sere. The eastern central area forms a low hill that is still forested. The soil is impermeable enough to allow beels and water holes to remain wet, despite being higher than the main river level. The southern edge has two or more heavily grazed islands separated by shallow channels.

DESCRIPTION OF HABITAT TYPES

During visits in 1996 and 1998, I noted that much of the Dibru-Saikhowa Wildlife Sanctuary was heavily grazed by cattle and buffaloes but the Amarpur area still had some significant stands of tall grass, notably towards the centre of the peninsula. Some of this was being managed for the production of thatch, which could be seen on the roofs of local houses. This very tall grass (3+ m) may have been a *Saccharum* sp. Other tall grass species occurring in the reserve (Choudhury 1994) include nal *Arundo donax*, khagori *Phragmites karka*, ekra *Erianthus ravennae* and ulu *Imperata cylindrica*, but I was

unable to identify which of these species were present in which areas of Amarpur. Owing to the almost impenetrable nature of this habitat, the precise extent of tall grass habitat was not assessed. The central north-east area had low, swampy forest containing bher *Salix tetrasperma*, which in places had become depauperate owing to continued logging, but open areas within the forest allowed tall grass to develop.

On the western side of the peninsula large areas had been, and were continuing to be, cleared for agriculture, threatening the value of the grassland habitat. Some areas of several hectares were being grazed to a height of 50-100 cm. To the south were many graziers tending cattle and buffalo. The grass had been cropped to ground level by these animals so that it was no longer suitable habitat for the vulnerable grassland birds. Forest on the eastern edge of Amarpur had been cleared and much grassland had been grazed short, though a mix of habitats remained. The northern area was not visited. Such grazing affected most of the rest of DSWS that I visited, except for the rather small area opposite Dighaltarang.

SELECTED SPECIES ACCOUNTS

Several threatened (BirdLife International 2000) or restricted-range (Stattersfield *et al.* 1998), and/or poorly known species were seen. I have included details where these were not included in the recent comprehensive work on the region by Grimmett *et al.* (1998).

GREATER ADJUTANT *Leptoptilos dubius* (Endangered) Two were seen on one day on the banks of the Lohit River, behaving very warily, probably indicating that they are persecuted in this area. (In Guwahati town they are very confiding.)

FERRUGINOUS POCHARD *Aythya nyroca* (Vulnerable) Fourteen were seen on the Dibang River.

The following three species were mostly seen in areas with dense grass of 2-4 m height, though they were also occasionally present where the grass was about 1 m high in areas adjacent to those with taller grass. The extensive areas of shorter grass did not harbour any of these three species.

JERDON'S BABBLER *Chrysomma altirostre* (Vulnerable) This species was seen in a small part of the tall grass in the Dighaltarang area by myself, together with P. Holt, K. Kazmierczak and later J. Hornbuckle (Hornbuckle *et al.* 1998) but seemed more common in the more extensive habitat at Amarpur. The birds in both areas responded well to tapes of the species's calls of the race *scindicum* recorded in Pakistan by P. Davidson. The calls were often a descending series of *tew-tew-tew tew tew tew*, slightly accelerating and then slowing on the last two notes. Birds also made an agitated *chitit tew, chitit tew* and at other times a series of short *sik! sik!* calls. These calls seem very similar to those described by Showler and Davidson (1999) for *C. a. scindicum*, and sound similar to the recordings they made.

Showler and Davidson (1999) reported that the species prefers tall grass, notably *Phragmites karka* and

Saccharum, and that *Typha* was present at all the locations; also, that it was never seen in degraded areas of grass. Baker (1932) reported it to be 'very common' in North Lakhimpur, where he never saw it 'except in very long grass or reeds'. At Amarpur, the birds also seemed to prefer tall grass but *Typha* was not an obvious member of the community there. On one occasion two birds were seen, apparently feeding, in an extensive bushy area with trampled and grazed grass no more than 1 m high. However, this species has not been seen in other areas of DSWS where degraded grassland is extensive.

A photograph of *C. a. scindicum* by N. Bean in *Oriental Bird Club Bulletin* 25: 24 can be compared with one of *C. a. griseigulare* from Amarpur in *Bulletin* 30 p. 51. The throat of the latter seems to be very pale grey (in the field it appeared whitish), and bordered by a buff breast (unfortunately, the published photo appears to show a heavy brown wash that was not present in the original). Other birds seen were thought to have a distinctly greyer throat. However, specimens examined at the Natural History Museum at Tring, U.K., did not show any obvious dimorphism. The chin feathers of the museum specimens are all pale greyish-white, and the basal half of the throat, breast and belly feathers are mid-grey, contrasting noticeably with the paler terminal half. Since Baral and Eames (1991) reported this species from Nepal, noting the 'dusky-grey cheeks and throat', perhaps more remains to be learned about the plumage of this bird in the field.

BLACK-BREASTED PARROTBILL *Paradoxornis flavirostris* (Vulnerable, restricted-range) This species was initially found by a beel with some tall grasses within an area of low woodland. It was also often seen within areas of low shrubs and singing from the tops of tall stands (3+m) of grass. Several pairs and/or small family flocks were observed each day. They responded well to tape playback of their calls, the characteristic call seeming to be an even-spaced *we we we we we we we*, rising slightly in pitch. Another call seemed to be a rather nasal *gneer gneer gneer*, perhaps the bleating call referred to by Ali and Ripley (1983). Birds in pairs seemed to be slightly dimorphic, with the black of the throat and breast being more extensive and blurred in one bird of the pairs seen (see photograph in *Oriental Bird Club Bulletin* 30: 51).

This species has subsequently been recorded from the main area of Dibru-Saikhowa: one bird was seen in the Dighaltarang area by P. Holt/Sunbird in November 1999; and a pair and two singles were seen there by C. Robson, E. Vercreyusse and D. Heywood (Robson 2000). Singh *et al.* (1999) reported seeing a group on 23 March 1998 in grassland adjacent to the Amarpur area in D'Ering Memorial Wildlife Sanctuary, Arunachal Pradesh. It has also been rediscovered at Kaziranga National Park (Barua and Sharma 1999) and photographed there on 2 May 2001 in an area of very tall grass, by D. Roberson (http://montereybay.com/creagrus/parrotbill_blbr.html).

MARSH BABBLER *Pellorneum palustre* (Vulnerable, restricted-range) This poorly known regional endemic was reported to be common in this area by Stevens (1914-1915). It was observed in parts of the Kolomi area of DSWS in 1996 and 1998 (Kazmierczak and

Allen 1997, Hornbuckle *et al.* 1998). It has also been recorded on a few occasions in Kaziranga N.P. (Barua and Sharma 1999). At Amarpur, however, it was common in tall grass and grass jungle with trees, usually close to water.

The calls were quite varied but often started with a low throaty rolling *grgrgrgrgr chew-hwee* or *grgrgrgrgr weehoo*, or *chackchack chuhee*, each phrase repeated many times, followed sometimes by a series of *chichi chu-hee*. On repeated playback this developed into a more aggressive *chacha hwee chacha hwee ...* later becoming *chachahwe we we we we wu*, the latter notes in a descending series. It responded aggressively to tape playback of most of its calls. An explosive *churkik choocheer* also seemed to belong to this species although, owing to the skulking nature of the bird, I could not be sure.

In the forested areas at Kolomi Puff-throated Babbler *P. ruficeps* was quite common, and was seen in the same habitat of low bushes at the forest edge as Marsh Babbler; it was also heard once at Amarpur. The skulking habits of the two do not help identification and, on two occasions, a single Marsh Babbler appeared to be trying to hide its white underparts, by keeping the body crouched low. The rusty sides of the throat, sides, flanks, and undertail-coverts, the pale rusty belly and the lack of an obviously contrasting chestnut crown distinguished Marsh Babbler. There seemed to be some variation in the rusty colour and in the streaking; one bird at least appeared to have a narrow broken eye-ring of two buffy crescents; these show on skins as pale buffy feather bases above and below the eye and were presumably exposed in some kind of display.

PUFF-THROATED BABBLER *Pellorneum ruficeps* was quite common in the forested areas at Kolomi, and was seen in the same habitat of low bushes at the forest edge as Marsh Babbler; it was also heard once at Amarpur.

JERDON'S BUSHCHAT *Saxicola jerdoni* This species was common in tall grass especially along watercourses. There seemed to be a male holding territory about every 100 m, both here and, during the 1998 trip at least, at Kolomi too. Males perched near the top of *Phragmites* stems at 2-3 m height and sang a clear, thrush-like song of two or three syllables, followed by a trill: *swee swoo swoo* (rapid trill). Females were much more skulking and only rarely seen. This species is reported as being very rare at Kaziranga N.P. (Barua and Sharma 1999).

RUFIOUS-RUMPED GRASSBIRD *Graminicola bengalensis* While not considered threatened, Rufous-rumped Grassbird is a rarely seen species that was observed three times in grass of about 1 m height. It did not respond in any observable fashion to a tape made of the species by N. Gardner at Chitwan. It is occasionally seen at Kaziranga N.P. (Barua and Sharma 1999). Singh *et al.* (1999) reported it in March 1998 in D'Ering Memorial Sanctuary, presumably in grassland.

CHESTNUT-CROWNED BUSH WARBLER *Cettia major* This species is known to overwinter in this tall grass habitat and was seen on one occasion. There seem to be few recent winter records and Barua and Sharma (1999) list only one recent record for Kaziranga N.P.

Other poorly known species, notably Swamp Prinia *Prinia burnesii* and Slender-billed Babbler *Turdoides longirostris*, were intensively searched for, but not found.

CONCLUSION

Since my visit, and in response to recommendations from Mr Sarmah and from the Rhino Foundation, the Assam State government has proposed that the reserve become a national park, and moves to achieve this are in progress. Hopefully this will enable the Indian Forestry Service to take appropriate measures to help conserve existing tall grass areas, and allow others to regenerate.

Local communities can play a positive role in the maintenance of seral ecosystems such as tall grass. Showler and Davidson (1999), quoting Dabadghao and Shankarnarayan (1973), detail the effects of anthropogenic changes on tall grassland habitats. Perhaps in the long term ecotourism can have a further positive impact. However, the growing demand for dairy products supplied by the graziers will certainly need to be balanced with the needs of wildlife.

The tall grass of Amarpur is of great value for many restricted-range grassland birds. Just how important remains unclear. Much remains to be discovered about the present distribution and populations of species such as Black-breasted Parrotbill and Marsh Babbler, not to mention their ecological requirements. More detailed bird surveys of the great national parks of the Assam floodplain are needed in order to get a better measure of the importance of Amarpur to these and other scarce or localised birds.

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APPENDIX

List of bird species recorded in the Amarapur area, Assam, India 17-21 March 1998

- RED JUNGLEFOWL *Gallus gallus*
- GREYLAG GOOSE *Anser anser*
- RUDDY SHELDUCK *Tadorna ferruginea*
- SPOT-BILLED DUCK *Anas poecilorhyncha*
- COMMON TEAL *Anas crecca*
- COMMON POCHARD *Aythya ferina*
- FERRUGINOUS POCHARD *Aythya nyroca*
- TUFTED DUCK *Aythya fuligula*
- YELLOW-LEGGED BUTTONQUAIL *Turnix tanki*
- WHITE-BROWED PICULET *Sasia ochracea*
- FULVOUS-BREASTED WOODPECKER *Dendrocopos macei*
- STREAK-THROATED WOODPECKER *Picus xanthopygaeus*
- GREATER FLAMEBACK *Chrysocolaptes lucidus*
- LINEATED BARBET *Megalaima lineata*
- BLUE-THROATED BARBET *Megalaima asiatica*
- COMMON HOOPOE *Upupa epops*
- INDIAN ROLLER *Coracias benghalensis*
- DOLLARBIRD *Eurystomus orientalis*
- COMMON KINGFISHER *Alcedo atthis*
- STORK-BILLED KINGFISHER *Halcyon capensis*
- WHITE-THROATED KINGFISHER *Halcyon smyrnensis*
- PIED KINGFISHER *Ceryle rudis*
- GREATER COUCAL *Centropus sinensis*
- ASIAN BARRED OWLET *Glaucidium cuculoides*
- LARGE-TAILED NIGHTJAR *Caprimulgus macrurus*
- ORIENTAL TURTLE DOVE *Streptopelia orientalis*
- SPOTTED DOVE *Streptopelia chinensis*
- RED COLLARED DOVE *Streptopelia tranquebarica*
- WHITE-BREASTED WATERHEN *Amaurornis phoenicurus*
- COMMON MOORHEN *Gallinula chloropus*
- PINTAIL SNIPE *Gallinago stenura*
- COMMON SNIPE *Gallinago gallinago*
- GREEN SANDPIPER *Tringa ochropus*
- COMMON SANDPIPER *Actitis hypoleucos*
- TEMMINCK'S STINT *Calidris temminckii*
- PACIFIC GOLDEN PLOVER *Pluvialis fulva*
- LITTLE RINGED PLOVER *Charadrius dubius*
- KENTISH PLOVER *Charadrius alexandrinus*
- RED-WATTLED LAPWING *Vanellus indicus*
- OSPREY *Pandion haliaetus*
- ORIENTAL HONEY-BUZZARD *Pernis ptilorhyncus*
- CRESTED SERPENT EAGLE *Spilornis cheela*
- HEN HARRIER *Circus cyaneus*
- COMMON KESTREL *Falco tinnunculus*
- DARTER *Anhinga melanogaster*
- LITTLE CORMORANT *Phalacrocorax niger*
- GREAT CORMORANT *Phalacrocorax carbo*
- LITTLE EGRET *Egretta garzetta*
- GREY HERON *Ardea cinerea*
- CATTLE EGRET *Bubulcus ibis*
- INDIAN POND HERON *Ardeola grayii*
- LITTLE HERON *Butorides striatus*
- BLACK STORK *Ciconia nigra*
- GREATER ADJUTANT *Leptoptilos dubius*
- LONG-TAILED SHRIKE *Lanius schach*
- GREY-BACKED SHRIKE *Lanius tephronotus*
- RUFIOUS TREEPIE *Dendrocitta vagabunda*
- HOUSE CROW *Corvus splendens*
- LARGE-BILLED CROW *Corvus macrorhynchos*
- WHITE-BROWED FANTAIL *Rhipidura aureola*
- BLACK DRONGO *Dicrurus macrocercus*
- COMMON IORA *Aegithina tiphia*
- DARK-THROATED THRUSH *Turdus ruficollis*
- SMALL NILTAVA *Niltava macgrigoriae*
- GREY-HEADED CANARY FLYCATCHER *Culicicapa ceylonensis*
- WHITE-TAILED RUBYTHROAT *Luscinia pectoralis*
- BLUETHROAT *Luscinia svecica*
- ORIENTAL MAGPIE ROBIN *Copsychus saularis*

DAURIAN REDSTART <i>Phoenicurus aureoreus</i>	SMOKY WARBLER <i>Phylloscopus fulgiventor</i>
COMMON STONECHAT <i>Saxicola torquata</i>	TICKELL'S LEAF WARBLER <i>Phylloscopus affinis</i>
WHITE-TAILED STONECHAT <i>Saxicola leucura</i>	GREY-HOODED WARBLER <i>Seicercus xanthoschistos</i>
JERDON'S BUSHCHAT <i>Saxicola jerdoni</i>	STRIATED GRASSBIRD <i>Megahurus palustris</i>
GREY BUSHCHAT <i>Saxicola ferrea</i>	RUFIOUS-RUMPED GRASSBIRD <i>Graminicola bengalensis</i>
CHESTNUT-TAILED STARLING <i>Sturnus malabaricus</i>	RUFIOUS-NECKED LAUGHINGTHRUSH <i>Garrulax ruficollis</i>
COMMON STARLING <i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	MARSH BABBLER <i>Pellorneum palustre</i>
ASIAN PIED STARLING <i>Sturnus contra</i>	PUFF-THROATED BABBLER <i>Pellorneum ruficeps</i>
COMMON MYNA <i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	WHITE-BROWED SCIMITAR BABBLER <i>Pomatorhinus schisticeps</i>
JUNGLE MYNA <i>Acridotheres fuscus</i>	STRIPED TIT BABBLER <i>Macronous gularis</i>
WHITE-VENTED MYNA <i>Acridotheres cinereus</i>	CHESTNUT-CAPPED BABBLER <i>Timalia pileata</i>
GREAT TIT <i>Parus major</i>	JERDON'S BABBLER <i>Chrysomma altirostre</i>
PLAIN MARTIN <i>Riparia paludicola</i>	STRIATED BABBLER <i>Turdoides earlei</i>
BARN SWALLOW <i>Hirundo rustica</i>	BLACK-BREASTED PARROTBILL <i>Paradoxornis flavirostris</i>
RED-WHISKERED BULBUL <i>Pycnonotus jocosus</i>	ORIENTAL SKYLARK <i>Alauda gulgula</i>
RED-VENTED BULBUL <i>Pycnonotus cafer</i>	WHITE WAGTAIL <i>Motacilla alba</i>
YELLOW-BELLIED PRINIA <i>Prinia flaviventris</i>	CITRINE WAGTAIL <i>Motacilla citreola</i>
PLAIN PRINIA <i>Prinia inornata</i>	YELLOW WAGTAIL <i>Motacilla flava</i>
PALE-FOOTED BUSH WARBLER <i>Cettia pallidipes</i>	OLIVE-BACKED PIPIT <i>Anthus hodgsoni</i>
CHESTNUT-CROWNED BUSH WARBLER <i>Cettia major</i>	STREAKED WEAVER <i>Ploceus manyar</i>
GREY-SIDED BUSH WARBLER <i>Cettia brunnifrons</i>	BLACK-HEADED MUNIA <i>Lonchura malacca</i>
COMMON TAILORBIRD <i>Orthotomus sutorius</i>	YELLOW-BREASTED BUNTING <i>Emberiza aureola</i>
DUSKY WARBLER <i>Phylloscopus fuscatus</i>	BLACK-FACED BUNTING <i>Emberiza spodocephala</i>